
P U L A R L E C T U R E S E R I E S

ALEXANDER
NEVSKY



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The imposing figure of Alexander Nevsky, one of the great ancestors of the Russians, inspires the people of the Soviet Union in the Patriotic War they are now waging against the Hitler invaders.

Over seven hundred years ago, in the middle of the thirteenth century, a vast horde of Mongols and Tatars led by Khan Batu the grandson of Genghis Khan, invaded Russia from the East, and laid waste to the land with fire and sword. They burned and sacked many towns and villages, massacred a part of the population and imposed heavy tribute on the survivors. Many of the people abandoned their homes and took refuge in the forests and wild places as the ancient chroniclers wrote 'Men scurried for places which formerly were the haunt of wolves, and wolves roamed freely in the former habitations of man.'

The region of Velikiy (or Great) Novgorod escaped devasfation.

In the middle of the thirteenth century, Velikiy Novgorod was an extensive region with the city of Novgorod as its capital. The power of Novgorod extended in the north to the Gulf of Finland and the White Sea, and in the east—to the Ural Mountains and to what were known as the "Ugor Lands," the vast territory of Siberia. The Novgorod domains included the cities of Pskov, Rzhev, Torzhok and Velkiye Luki. It was in Novgorod that the idea

arose of regenerating Russia and of expelling the Mongol-Tatar invaders from the land

Novgorod was rich in timber fur, fish and copper, but was poor in grain. It was situated within easy reach of the main river basins of Russia—the Volga, the Dnieper and the Western Dvina. The river Volkhov connected it with the Gulf of Finland, through which ran the route to the western countries. The numerous rivers which flowed through the region, particularly in the basin of the Volga, connected it with the rich grain districts of the south.

Favourably situated in the middle of the trade routes, Novgorod became an important commercial centre, and in the city numerous handicrafts flourished. The Novgorod merchants, the Novgorod and Pskov handicraftsmen, as well as the Novgorod and Pskov peasants were all more or less dependent upon the commerce of Novgorod. Their prosperity depended upon the strength and stability of the political metropolis—Novgorod.

In the hour of peril, when the alien invader threatened Novgorod, the entire population rose to defend its land and liberties. "Stand fast for Velikiy Novgorod!" was their battle cry.

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In the early part of the thirteenth century, northern neighbours of Novgorod, the Swedes, and its western neighbours, the German barons, increased their predatory incursions into Russia. This "Crusader rabble," as Karl Marx called them, had taken part in the Crusades for the conquest of Jerusalem, but had been defeated. Now, taking advantage of the devastation of Russia by the Mongol-Tatar hordes, they invaded the country with an easy "loot."

In 1201, the Order of the Knights of God founded in the district where Riga now stands

Order consisted of former Crusaders At about the same time the Knights of the Teutonic Order appeared in East Prussia The object of both these knightly Orders was to conquer lands in the east

The robber hordes of Teutonic Knights ruthlessly plundered and massacred the Slavs, Lithuanians and Chud tribes, robbed them of their freedom, imposed their faith upon them and reduced them to servitude

As the ancient chronicle relates in 1217, the inhabitants of Novgorod and Pskov defeated these German cui-knights in a series of sanguinary battles and drove them from the land In 1237, the Knights of the Teutonic Order and another Order, the Knights of the Cross, united to form the Livonian Order and resumed their efforts to conquer Novgorod

The people of Novgorod fought heroically against the Germans who pressed upon them in the west, and against the Swedes who were attacking them in the north

Being in constant danger of attack, Novgorod was obliged to maintain strong armed forces for its defense These forces were led by the Prince of Novgorod Unlike the other cities of ancient Russia, the people of Novgorod elected their Prince At the time of which we are speaking, the Prince of Novgorod was Alexander, son of the Grand Prince Yaroslav Sevolodovich

From his early childhood Alexander witnessed the fierce struggles the people of Novgorod waged against their mortal enemies and would-be conquerors—the Germans in the west and the Swedes in the north While still a boy he took part in these campaigns in the ranks of the force led by his father This experience had hardened him as a warrior and had intensified his love for his country At the age of eighteen, Alexander was already a full-fledged warrior, brave and intrepid, and a skilful commander

of his own force By his bearing he won the hearts of the people of Novgorod and they elected him as their Prince On ascending the throne he won the support of his people not only as a stout warrior, but also as a shrewd statesman

When Novgorod was beset with grave danger, Alexander displayed extreme flexibility in his policy He secured some mitigation of the tribute which the people of Novgorod were compelled to pay the Mongol Khan and ensured the land of Novgorod security from Mongol-Tatar incursions This left Alexander free to take vigorous action against those who had covetous designs against Russia

Disagreements arose now and again between Alexander and the people and sometimes their relations became so strained that Alexander left the city, but on each occasion the people recalled their Prince, for they were confident of his devotion to Russia and trusted his skill as a military leader

The first to attack Novgorod were the Swedes This was in 1240 The object of their campaign was to seize Novgorod and to subjugate the population. The Swedish forces were led by the Swedish King's son-in-law Birger

The people of Novgorod got wind of the hostile preparations of the Swedes Their lively commercial intercourse with foreign countries enabled them to obtain fairly full particulars of the preparations for and the purposes of the campaign, and accordingly took measures of defence They fortified the line of the river Shelon, they placed guards along the coast, and instructed their merchants who travelled to the towns of the Hanseatic League* with merchandize to be more vigilant than ever and to bring back all the information they could

In the summer of 1240 the Swedes reached the

* The union of commercial cities situated in the vicinity of the Baltic and North Seas Novgorod was a member of League.

banks of the river Neva. Their plan was to approach Novgorod via the Neva Lake Ladoga and the river Volkhov, attack it and subdue it. They were so confident of victory that Birger even sent Alexander a challenge in which he said Resist if you can. Know that I am already taking your land in captivity.

Alexander resolved to give the enemy battle at the spot where he least expected it, viz., at the Neva. His forces rapidly marched to Ladoga and attacked the Swedes stationed at the estuary of the river Izhora.

On July 15, 1240, a battle took place between the Novgorodites and the Swedes, which is known in history as the Battle of the Neva. The Russians launched a vigorous attack, driving into the very heart of the Swedish camp. The Swedes resisted, but they were pressed towards the river. Alexander pushed forward to engage Birger in mortal combat and cut him down with his sword.

The Swedes were unable to withstand the onslaught and began to retreat to the river pursued by the Russians to prevent them from embarking on their ships. That day many Russian warriors displayed exceptional courage and heroism.

The remnants of the defeated Swedish forces managed to embark and sail back to their country. The campaign which had been launched with such far-reaching objects thus ended in utter defeat. The attempt of the Swedes to vanquish Novgorod failed. Under Alexander's skilful leadership, the people of Novgorod fought heroically for their independence and successfully beat off the foreign invaders.

For the victory he achieved over the Swedes on the river Neva, Alexander was given the surname of Nevsky. After this victory his fame spread still wider.

* The defeat sustained by the Swedes knocked the desire to attack Russia out of them for quite a long

time, but the lesson which they had been taught was not learned by their neighbours, the Livonian Knights

Owing to the treachery of Tverdila Ivankovich, a merchant of Pskov the Livonian Knights succeeded, in 1240, in capturing Pskov and Isborsk, and in the course of the winter of 1240-41 they captured the Novgorod cities of Luga and Tesov. They also captured the city of Koporye and converted it into a fortress with the object of using it as a base for the conquest of the whole land of Novgorod. As they marched on Novgorod their battle cry was 'We shall vanquish all the Slavs!'

The Germans left a trail of death and destruction. As the chronicler relates, on capturing Pskov they set fire to the entire merchant section of the town, devastated the entire countryside and took many captives and sent them to their country.

As soon as Pskov was definitely in their hands the Germans began to fortify it. The lands in its vicinity were shared out among the knights, and the peasants who had cultivated that land were reduced to serfdom. The government of Pskov was concentrated in the hands of the Grand Master of the Order, Hermann von Balk.

According to the Germans' plans, the capture of Pskov was to have been the first stage in the conquest of the entire land of Novgorod, including its capital and stronghold, Novgorod. These plans had to be thwarted and Pskov recaptured from the Livonian Knights.

To all the cities of Velikiy Novgorod Alexander issued the call "Russians, arise!"

As was the case in 1240, Alexander quickly mustered the necessary forces for this new war.

The troops Novgorod had brought out against the Swedes in 1240, and which it brought out against the Germans in 1242, were, in the main, equipped in the same way as their enemy. In the illustrations

sketched in the annals of the battles of this period that have come down to us the Novgorod warriors can barely be distinguished from the Livonian Knights. The only difference between them was that the Germans wore round helmets known as "saladi," whereas the Novgorodites wore spiked helmets called "shelomas." Both the Germans and the Novgorodites were armed with lances, swords and shields. The upper part of their bodies and their legs were protected by heavy chain armor.

Such was the equipment of the Russian nobility and the wealthier classes and of their retainers. When threatened by a powerful enemy in command of large forces, the Prince called for the formation of a popular militia, to supplement the regular armed forces. Sometimes this militia embraced the entire male population capable of bearing arms.

The militia armed themselves with whatever came to hand bows and arrows tipped with iron or flint, axes, maces, improvised pikes, swords and long knives. Both in 1240 and in 1242 Alexander called up such a militia and led them into battle against the invaders.

In the period of which we are speaking, the German knights lined up for battle in the form of a trapezium, with the upper wedge turned towards the enemy. This formation, with picked warriors at the spearhead, enabled the Germans to pierce the enemy's front, break up his forces and defeat them piecemeal. The Novgorodites called this the "pig formation."

In leading his forces against the Germans Alexander bore in mind the tactics they usually employed and determined to line up his forces in such a way as to prevent the German horsemen from developing their initial success. He planned to hem them in and deprive them of their mobility and thus convert the battle mainly into a fight between foot men, in which the Novgorodites were far more skilled.

and experienced than the Germans. With this object in view he lined up his forces in V form with the opening facing the enemy. This formation enabled his forces to envelop the enemy, hem in his line, restrict his power to manoeuvre and to strike him a crushing blow. The Novgorodites called this the 'heel formation'.

The Novgorodites fought both on horseback and on foot. At the beginning of the battle they fought in mass formation, after which they deployed and fought in small groups. In their tactics they resorted to various military ruses, such as ambush, outflanking and feigned retreat.

The area that was to become the field of battle between the Novgorodites and the Germans was an extensive plain between Lakes Peipus, Pskov and Ilmen. The shortest route to Novgorod was that between Lakes Peipus and Pskov, and this route the Germans chose.

Alexander planned to forestall the enemy's operations by means of a few swift strokes at the less important points in order to confuse the enemy and to restrict his movements, and then to finish him off with a decisive blow and to drive him from the country.

At first he directed his drive north, towards the fortified town of Koporye, as the good waterways leading from that town provided the Germans with the best means of threatening Novgorod. He calculated that by removing this menace he would be free to conduct his operations in other quarters.

Alexander set out with his troops for Koporye in 1241 and on the way he defeated the Germans who had advanced into the valley of the river Luga. On reaching the town he laid siege to it and finally captured it by storm.

In the spring of the following year he marched to Pskov. The Germans fought stubbornly to retain the town, but the Russian inhabitants actively as-

sisted the besiegers. The Germans unable to withstand the attack on their front and in their rear, collapsed and the city was captured. Over seventy knights of great renown fell at the capture of Pskov, observes the chronicler, and many of them were taken captive to Novgorod.

The capture of Koporin and Pskov did not however decide the issue. With the object of utterly exterminating the enemy, Alexander carried the war into his territory. He and the entire Russian people, regarded the struggle against the German crusaders as a struggle for the very existence of Russia, for their culture and faith, for their language and for their future.

Before launching the decisive attack additional reconnoitring was required and it was also necessary to safeguard the flanks and the rear. Alexander therefore halted at Isbor and bivouacked his forces in the area between Lakes Peipus and Pskov in order to be within easy reach of the junction of the roads in the event of the enemy moving towards Novgorod.

This was early in the spring. The ice on the lakes was still firm. At dawn, on April 5, the Russian outpost saw the Germans moving across the ice of Lake Peipus. Their lances poised, their helmets and chain mail glistening in the rising sun, they advanced in a dark mass, mounted and on foot, in the direction of the Novgorodites. For their campaign against Novgorod the Germans had what for those days was an enormous force. Evidently, the Germans had discovered where the Novgorodites were encamped and pressed forward in close formation.

Alexander lined up his forces in his favourite "heel formation." The wedge of the German "pig," consisting entirely of mail-clad warriors, advanced slowly but surely. The Novgorodites waited calm and fearless, to meet their mortal foe. At last the battle commenced. An eye witness related that the

spirit of the Russian forces was exceptionally high and that they fought like lions

Clouds of arrows were shot into the ranks of the enemy compelling the pigs flanks to press close to its centre. The mobile wings of the Novgorod forces, consisting mainly of horsemen, covered by the well-aimed arrows of the bowmen charged the German flanks in order to get to the enemy's rear. This manœuvre was successful. Soon the Germans were driven into a close-packed heap, their progress was checked and their formation was broken up. Surrounded by the Novgorodites, they were unable to bring their shock forces into action.

The ice dyed red with blood, cracked, and in places gave way under the weight of men crowded upon it.

The Germans failed to withstand the onslaught. They wavered and then turned and fled to the western shore of the lake, pursued and cut down by the Novgorodites.

The pursuit ended with the fall of night. The ice was strewn with dead bodies. Many of the warrior of both sides perished under the ice. The Novgorodites took many prisoners.

Among the prisoners were men from subject tribes whom the Germans had pressed into their service. These Alexander released, and on their departure he said to them "Go and tell them all in foreign lands that Russia lives. Let them, without fear come to us as guests. But he who comes against us with the sword shall perish by the sword. Such is the law of the land of Russia, and such will always be."

Alexander's victory over the Germans made a deep impression upon his contemporaries, not only in Novgorod, Suzdal and other Russian towns, but also outside of Russia, in the East and the West.

Alexander's fame as a great military leader and patriot remained undimmed to this day. He wa

able quickly to gauge the enemy's strength compared with his own calculate the time and place of battle and promptly take bold decisions He closely watched the enemy's movements, and when circumstances became unfavourable for attack he temporarily assumed the defensive in order to gain time

He lined up his forces with a view to striking a telling blow at the enemy's weakest spots, in his flanks and rear His actions were always swift, determined and sudden taking the enemy by surprise the defeat of the Germans on Lake Peipus or the Battle on the Ice as it is called, has gone into the history of war as a model of skilful leadership

Soon after the Battle on the Ice the Livonian Knights sent their emissaries to Alexander, offering to conclude peace and to exchange prisoners The Germans pledged themselves never to attack Novgorod again

They broke their pledge, however The Russian chroniclers repeatedly refer to the craftiness of the Livonian Germans and to their subsequent attempts to attack Pskov and Novgorod In 1253 the knights again attacked Pskov, but the Novgorodites hastened to its assistance and beat off the Germans The attack was repeated in 1269 and in 1299, but each time it was repulsed On recuperating their forces, however, the Germans resumed their raids

Of the series of defeats sustained by the Germans at Pskov in the course of many years the gravest was that suffered by the Grand Master of the Livonian Order, von Plettenberg, whom the fascists in Germany have exalted to the place of "national hero"

In 1502, Plettenberg set out to achieve what his predecessors in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had failed to do, namely, subjugate Novgorod and Pskov With a horde of knights out of easy gain, together with their vassals, their serfs

and local Chud tribesmen, they set out on the march.

At first, Plettenberg gained some success in a battle fought against the forces of Novgorod and Pskov at Izborsk, but at Pskov the Russian forces struck him such a heavy blow that he fled in panic. The chronicler of that battle says that the German warriors, all 'excreting blood,' barely managed to reach Riga.

As for Novgorod, the Germans never reached it. Thanks to Alexander's skilful leadership and the staunchness and courage of the people of Novgorod and Pskov who protected the integrity and independence of their country Novgorod escaped the slavery which the German knights desired to force upon them.

The people of the Soviet Union revere the patriotism and military prowess displayed by Alexander Nevsky and the heroism of the people of Novgorod and Pskov who fought so resolutely to defend their country against the German aggressors. Their stirring example inspires them in the great struggle they are waging today to protect their liberty, independence and honour from the encroachments of the successors of the "cur-knights," the fascist hordes of Hitler. Characteristic of the honour in which the Russian people hold their heroic ancestors and the connection they see between them and the present struggle is the recent institution by the Soviet Government of the Order of Alexander Nevsky, which is awarded to commanders of the Red Army—from platoon commanders to regimental commanders—who combine personal courage with skilful leadership, valour with military knowledge, inspiration with shrewd calculation.

Alexander Nevsky inspires the Soviet warriors to perform great feats of valour in the struggle against Hitler's hordes.

On the other hand, the German fascists have learned nothing from the defeats which the Russian

a the past repeatedly inflicted upon their haughty predecessors, and with mule-like obstinacy are persisting in the dirty work for which their predecessors were repeatedly thrashed Hitler has picked up the rusty sword of the Livonian Knights and, in his turn, is trying to seize the lands of Russia But the same fate awaits him as overtook the "cur-knights

Under the victorious banner of Lenin and under Stalin's leadership the people of the Soviet Union will crush the German aggressors who have invaded the Land of Soviets, will annihilate their armed forces, and liberate the world from the bloody plague of Hitlerism forever

